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Latin American Perspectives, Vol. 25, No. 4, Che Guevara and His Legacy (Jul., 1998), 9-18.

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Che Guevara and Contemporary Revolutionary Movements

by
James Petras

To discuss the relevance of Che Guevara's thought and practice today, it is important to distinguish his revolutionary political ideas from their particular tactical application in the form of "armed struggle" or rural guerrilla warfare. This distinction is important because in the first instance Che was a revolutionary theorist even when he was engaged in armed combat. It is also useful for analyzing the different levels of his thought and practice. His writings include a general analysis of the class structure, the role of imperialism, political alliances, historical experiences, and the correlation of forces on the international, regional, and national level. His revolutionary thought and practice combined a critical analysis of imperialism and capitalism with active involvement in and reflections on the construction of socialism, and he conceived of socialism as part of a new world order. While the imperialist countries organized on a world scale to destroy each revolution, revolutionaries sought to extend each national revolution internationally.

Che's general analysis of capitalism, imperialism, and socialism and his specific tactical position on guerrilla warfare were linked to his views of ethics and political practice. His thought was concerned with the relation of revolutionary organizations to oppressed people, the relation between political agency and objective conditions, the interrelation between revolution and imperialism, and the relation between personal values and revolutionary action.

I would argue that Che's relevance to contemporary revolutionary politics is found in his general analysis of politics and his reflections on political action and economic structures rather than the tactical ideas he applied to specific conjunctural circumstances. To conflate these three levels of Che's revolutionary praxis or to reduce his thoughts to his tactical discussion of guerrilla or armed struggle is to misconstrue and diminish their significance today.

From Che's general analysis and political reflections one can derive a variety of social and political strategies and tactics and a variety of organiza-

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tional forms of action that may or may not include armed struggle and guerrilla warfare. Since the latter were derived from specific contextual determinations and conjunctural circumstances, they are historically limited in their utility and relevance. Therefore, it is more fruitful to focus on Che's revolutionary understanding of capitalism and particularly of imperialism and his political reflections on subjectivity and objective conditions.

CHE AGAINST THE GLOBALISTS

For Che, the expansion of capitalism on a world scale and its deepening penetration of markets, production, distribution, banking, and services was essentially a political and social phenomenon. The economic movements of capitalism were premised on political-military action that created the "appropriate" exploitative social relations between capital and labor. Within this imperialist political and social framework, capital flows took place, multinationals expanded, foreign investors bought privatized public enterprises, and International Monetary Fund austerity programs were implemented. Che's description of the expansion of capitalism in terms of political and social power relations is in sharp contrast with contemporary theorists' babble about "globalization." Whereas they describe the expansion of capitalism as impersonal, universal, and irreversible because it is the product of "natural" economic processes, Che recognizes that political power is the source of world capitalist expansion and focuses on imperialism. The globalization theorists have no general theory apart from references to technological and market relations that fail to explain exploitation and inequality.

Che defines imperialism as a political and social *relation* between classes and states and therefore subject to transformation. The globalists describe globalization as an *objective structure* that spreads through its internal logic, rejecting the possibility of its transformation by some social or political agency. Che conceptualizes imperialism as a contradictory historical phenomenon whose expansion creates class and national conflicts that lead to its decline. In contrast, globalists hold a linear conception of capitalist expansion that leads to its consolidation into a new world order. The most extreme of them conceive of capitalism as becoming a self-perpetuating world system in which the only changes that take place are countries' rising and declining, becoming cores or peripheries.

Once the exploitive socioeconomic relations are in place, for Che subjectivity is the determining factor in the social order and the economic system. In globalist thought, economic structures continue to dominate subjectivity,

leaving little room for social action. Whereas for Che the big questions of state power, imperialist domination, and class relations remain at the center of political debate, among contemporary globalists the big questions have been resolved. For them the only politics possible is negotiating the terms of surrender to imperialism. In a word, Che challenges world imperialism by organizing resistance at the micro level of the villages of Africa and Bolivia and in international forums. The globalists argue that local activities should operate in the interstices of the capitalist system.

Che's political perspective evokes a Promethean image of humans struggling to change their world. Contemporary globalists evoke Schopenhauer's pessimism regarding the prospects of transforming capitalism. Today the fundamental theoretical and political conflict is precisely between Che's Promethean perspective and the globalist Schopenhauerian pessimism and/or its euphoric Panglossian counterpart, holding that this is already the "best of all possible worlds." To approach revolutionary political action today requires that one adopt the Guevarian perspective. The point of departure for theoretical analysis and practical action resides in examining the *political* and *class* relations that underpin the expansion of capitalism. The transformation of the structures of capitalism and imperialism begins with the *social relations* that sustain them at every level—from the most basic units (the workplace, the local economy) through the productive sectors and the national state to the international financial institutions and imperialist states.

SUBJECTIVITY, "OBJECTIVE CONDITIONS," AND REVOLUTION

Following this line of inquiry and practice, we turn to Che's second major contribution to contemporary revolutionary politics, the centrality of human action—consciousness, disciplined organization, and ideological clarity. His greatest enemies on the left were the ideologues and epigones of the pro-Soviet Communist and Social Democratic parties who counseled passivity in the face of the development of the productive forces. They argued that revolutionary parties should promote the maturing of capitalism, postponing revolutionary action to a later stage because the working class was still in the process of being formed. To these reactionary or at best reformist perspectives Che laid out several objections and an alternative perspective.

In the first place, he argued that while capitalism could "advance," it would do so by exploiting more workers and undermining the very conditions of their existence—that in the course of developing the forces of pro-

duction it was deepening the inequalities and undermining the capacity of classes and nations to act for themselves. Secondly, he saw no *a priori* reason that the workers and peasants should postpone their social revolutionary activities if the exploitive conditions and misery and the collective experiences that made possible a revolution were already in place. The question for Che was not a quantitative but a qualitative one. Did imperialism polarize classes within the basic units of production? Did exploitive class relations characterize the social formation? If so, then revolution was not only possible but necessary.

Today the same reformist perspective is present as in Che's time; only the names and language have changed.

Present-day ideologues of the center-left such as Jorge Castañeda argue that in this stage of global capitalism the choice is between different varieties of capitalism: neoliberalism (the retrograde variety) or welfare capitalism (the progressive one). In addition to accommodating to capitalism, they argue that the current tasks of the left revolve around modernizing the economy, reforming the state, and decentralizing the government. Behind these general formulations is the notion that social revolution is impossible (because of globalization) or that it belongs to the distant future. In the meantime, the contemporary reformists argue that the task is to collaborate with the modern bourgeoisie and imperialism to construct a competitive economy capable of participating in the global economy and providing for the welfare of the people.

As in Che's time, his contemporary revolutionary followers reject this thesis and propose another based on the contradictions emerging from capitalism. First, it is precisely the most advanced and dynamic bourgeoisies (those who are most active in investing, exporting, and producing) that are the most exploitive in terms of the capital/labor relation. They run the assembly plants or subcontract the sweatshops in the free-trade zones, and wages in the modern sector are a small fraction of the value added. Secondly, the "development of the forces of production" as it occurs today under the total domination of the state (without any power sharing as in the populist era) is disintegrating and displacing masses of workers and peasants (through technology, speculation, buyouts of local industries, cheap imports, etc.). It is *not* expanding or creating a new cohesive working class. Thirdly, the "reform of the state" that the reformists favor means in practice the massive firing of public employees in social services and the increasing influence of a small nucleus of foreign-trained technocrats—and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—who are paid servants or associates of imperialism and who collaborate with the local ruling class and its state. Finally, decentralization shifts the responsibility for social services to local governments without the corresponding re-

sources, while revenue becomes concentrated in a centralized executive that funds the economic elite.

From their critique of the contemporary reformists the contemporary followers of Che establish a different set of premises for political action. To begin with, they argue that contemporary electoral politics is not the arena in which to bring about social change—that only direct action involving mass mobilization has been effective. For example, it was not electoral officials that ousted corrupt rulers like Bucaram or Collor but mass demonstrations, and land occupations rather than Congress are providing land to peasants in Paraguay and Brazil. To back up this proposition, they point to the past 15 years of political practice. Secondly, they argue that deepening poverty and the increasing inequality between exploited and displaced workers and peasants necessitates class solidarity rather than social pacts with the exploiters. Again, this is based on recent historical experiences and empirical observations. Thirdly, they point to class conflict within civil society (between landowners and rural workers, corporate executives and wage workers, and so on) and the state's centrality in promoting the neoliberal agenda. They reject the ideas of a homogeneous and virtuous "civil society" and an evil populist state. Finally, they argue that political action needs to be structured, organized, disciplined, and oriented by political education. They are opposed to both spontaneity and elite electoral pacts.

The struggle between contemporary revisionists and revolutionaries mirrors the earlier debates and conflicts between Che and his antagonists. Who are the followers of Che's revolutionary praxis today? As I mentioned earlier, the issue is decidedly not counting the number of guns (the military equation) but understanding the politics and practices that guide the new revolutionary social organizations. We can start with the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil, the National Peasant Federation in Paraguay, the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Mexico, the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces, the Peasant Syndicate and sectors of the mining unions in Bolivia, the National Federation of Indian and Peasant Organizations in Ecuador, the National Indian and Peasant Coordination in Guatemala, the Democratic Peasant Alliance in El Salvador, and the Revolutionary Force in the Dominican Republic.

What distinguishes these revolutionary groups from the reformists is not the question of arms but the content and style of politics. What links them with Guevara is the common political perspective, political diagnosis, and point of departure for political action: the social relations of production, the assumption that subjectivity is the key mover of history, the idea that subjectivity needs to be expressed in organized and disciplined forms, and the con-

viction that the centerpiece of politics is the liberation of the peasants and workers by their own *direct action* rather than by electoral elites divorced from their everyday struggles. This does not mean that these revolutionary forces do not engage in electoral politics or look for support from electoral parties proximate to their political positions. It does mean that electoral politics and multiclass alliances are subordinated to direct action politics and to their programmatic agenda.

One might argue that this analysis dilutes the revolutionary essence of Che's thought by including diverse groups with different strategies in non-military formations. In response to this criticism it must be repeated that Che's thought and practice are multifaceted, complex, and even in some cases contextually determined. Che was acutely aware of historical variation and objective realities, and in particular cases he made tactical errors. This line of argument, far from diluting it, expands and incorporates his broader political thought; it rejects the reductionist militarist approach in favor of a broader theoretical understanding, one that explains why most of the social political movements enumerated above see themselves as the inheritors of Che's practice and theory.

INTERNATIONALISM

Whereas Che started from the internationalist perspective of the Cuban revolution and moved toward a specific national and even local area of action, contemporary revolutionary movements start from a solid base at the local or regional level and move toward the national and international. Despite his clear understanding of the nature of imperialist politics and profound insight into the multiplier effects of revolutions and the structural vulnerabilities of his adversaries, Che was tactically weak and at times uninformed about the specific locales where he originated action. His activities in Bolivia and the Congo, where the local people were not receptive to revolutionary politics, are an example. In contrast, contemporary revolutionary movements have a fundamental grasp of local conditions, including a deep understanding of regional and national power structures and the particular appeals and organizational capacities of the exploited classes, but they are still in the initial stages of formulating an internationalist strategy. A synthesis of the theoretical and practical strengths of Che Guevara's international analysis and the local practice of contemporary revolutionary movements would provide maximum strategic, tactical, and organizational capabilities for the task of creating the conditions for a socialist transformation of capitalism.

ETHICS AND POLITICS

Che grappled with policies for reducing hierarchy and eliminating bureaucracy and privileged distinctions between leaders and followers. He advocated engaging in the everyday work and life of the people while exercising authority in positions of leadership. He believed in employing means compatible with their ends, and he practiced teaching by example rather than by fiat or decree.

Ethical practices are not idealistic conceptions divorced from material existence. Revolutionary theory includes norms as well as action. A fuller understanding of the political relevance and continuities of Che Guevara's influence on contemporary revolutionary politics requires that we examine his concept of the ethics of politics.

Che's private life was austere; his political influence did not result in the accumulation of wealth and privilege. For him the revolution was about social advances for the class as a whole rather than individual aggrandizement. The less material distance between leaders and followers, the more likely it was that they would share problems and that the leaders would respond to the needs of the rank and file. Moreover, the less the material distance, the fewer the obstacles to direct communication and access and the less likely that leadership positions would attract opportunists interested in utilizing politics as a trampoline for a lucrative career.

Che's sharing of material conditions is practiced by all of the major new revolutionary movements today. The leaders of the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil, of the Cocaleros in Bolivia, and of the National Peasant Federation of Paraguay live in housing and eat food and wear clothing quite similar to that of their mass supporters. The gratifications of leadership lie not in material rewards or privileges but in creating and improving one's life chances to the same degree as those of the militants of the movement. Good leadership is rewarded by respect, recognition, and authority among the rank and file.

Che constantly fought bureaucratic structures and methods by fighting for effective and efficient organization, bringing the cadres to work in the practical physical tasks, and training ordinary people in the tasks to be accomplished. Antibureaucratic struggle demanded discipline and structures that permitted extra effort and individual initiatives. Today's promising revolutionary movements are highly organized and yet permit regional and local initiatives in the realization of common goals and interests. The Landless Workers' Movement, for example, is a disciplined, organized movement with a national leadership whose purpose is to realize a profound agrarian reform. While the national leadership provides general direction, the regional

organizations organize the land occupations, resistance, and production, and the local co-ops determine their internal organization and policies.

Che was a firm believer in productive work—of combining physical and mental tasks as key elements in understanding the everyday concerns of the people. He saw volunteer labor as an important ingredient in breaking down elitist outlooks among professionals and intellectuals—teaching them how the surplus that provided for cultural activity was generated. More basically, he saw this as a key element in creating bonds between manual and mental workers to avoid the emergence of a “new class” based on the superiority of the intellectuals.

Today the new revolutionary movements are engaged in a similar struggle: to recruit intellectuals to serve the movement rather than become self-appointed vanguards. One of the areas of greatest conflict in this regard is the struggle between the professionals of the NGOs and the popular leaders of the revolutionary social movements. In many cases, the NGO professionals fragment the movements, subject them to tutelage, or direct them into apolitical projects, thus undermining their revolutionary political program. The revolutionary movements insist on setting the agenda, defining their needs, and then inviting the intellectuals to further the struggle on their terms. Some intellectuals accept this challenge, but many withdraw.

Personal and political morality are entwined in Che's practice. In Cuba's Sierra Maestra he forbade his comrades to use torture to secure information. He argued that the use of torture would defeat the purpose of the revolution, which was to abolish inhumane treatment, and would corrupt the revolutionaries practicing it. Likewise, he frequently liberated common soldiers during the revolutionary war, recognizing that they too were victims of the system; only torturers and officials involved in assassinations were summarily executed.

Che's idea was that revolutionary organizations should engage in activity and create relations that preconfigured the new society. His concept of the “new man” was based on the idea that what is done today and how it is done shape what will emerge in the future. He did not share the Soviet belief that a commercial stimulus was needed to motivate people to create a communist society. On the contrary, he correctly perceived that behind the state-property facade the Soviets were creating a capitalist mentality. Thus, Che identified some of the factors that contributed to the collapse of Soviet Communism and the sudden emergence of capitalist ideology. Che and Castro argued that it was impossible to build communism with dollar signs in people's eyes. This is not to say that material improvements were not essential to Che's vision. What he was arguing was that the means (collective struggle for collective

improvement based on equal effort) were just as important as the end result (material improvement).

The same ideas inform many of the contemporary revolutionary movements in Latin America today. These movements struggle to use ethical means to achieve just ends. They do not coerce their members to pursue a single form of social organization after land has been expropriated; instead they educate them and then let them choose. They consult their members in organized assemblies; there is no enlightened caudillo who acts for the people. Of course, this is a norm that is not always practiced. In any mass movement there are individuals who at times engage in selfish activity and seek to gain advantage at the expense of others. There are also leaders who dislike criticism. The point, however, is that these are deviations, not the rules that guide behavior as in capitalist or Stalinist organizational codes.

Teaching by example was Che's guiding principle. In his active role in the guerrilla struggle, he suffered the same hardships, took the same risks, and asked no special favors despite his serious physical handicap (asthma). In fact, he overcommitted himself, worked longer hours, slept less, and was very critical of his errors and lapses. His pedagogical style was that learning was based on observing what one *did*, not only what one *said*. Too often the masses lost confidence in ideas because of the divergences between what leaders said and how they lived or practiced politics. Che considered trust essential in building a popular movement and creating a principled organization and to this end urged leaders to teach by example.

Today's revolutionary leaders apply Che's teachings: at conferences they eat the same food and sleep in the same kind of bed, travel in the same kind of bus, engage in the same kind of practice and work as their followers. When they speak for land occupation, they are in the first line of action, not in the headquarters in the capital city issuing press releases and giving television interviews. The success of the new revolutionary movements is in part a result of the practice of the ethics and politics articulated by Che. Popular admiration and emulation arise from the shared belief that the material bases of the new society are built on the values of egalitarianism, personal responsibility, and mutual respect.

CHE AND THE TACTICS OF ARMED STRUGGLE

Probably the area in which Che's contribution is least relevant today is that of military tactics. His guerrilla success in Cuba was based largely on the pre-existing mass organization in the cities, the historical politicization of the peasantry in certain regions, and the strategic genius of Fidel Castro. His ex-

periences in the Congo and Bolivia were largely unsuccessful efforts to crystallize a struggle for power.

This is not to say that armed struggle has not been a successful strategy (consider, for example, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Cuba, China, and Mozambique) or that there are no important armed popular movements today. Rather, in this area one must be careful to spell out what is relevant in Che's writings and practices and what remains anecdotal. Che spelled out the conditions under which armed struggle was necessary: dictatorship (Batista's Cuba, Barriento's Bolivia), imperialist invasion (Vietnam, Guatemala), colonial/neocolonial dictatorship (Congo). Some of these conditions are present in some countries of Latin America today. Colombia, for example, despite its electoral façade, is a terrorist state in which death squads and the military rule vast regions of the country, and Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional is a party-state dictatorship that assassinates rivals and steals elections. Further, Che recognized the limits of capitalist democracy and questioned the willingness of the bourgeoisie to accept electoral outcomes that went against their fundamental property interests. He doubted that imperialism would respect democracies that opposed foreign investment, debt collection, and market opportunities—here anticipating the U.S. military overthrow of the democratically elected Allende regime.